

Forms Design Principles

The North Dakota Century Code directs the state forms management program to develop and implement standards for design.

Design of a form evolves out of forms analysis. Items determined essential through the analysis are built into the form. Items that are not needed are eliminated. When the essential elements of the analysis are properly designed into the form it will take less time to complete, process, file, and locate later. The data will have greater value, be easy to use, and be more accurate. Properly applied design principles will benefit every state agency through greater efficiency and cost savings.

The basic elements of forms design are:

1. Title and identification
2. Paper and ink
3. Captions
4. Spaces
5. Order
6. Appearance

1. TITLE AND IDENTIFICATION

Without proper title and agency identification, a person may not be sure they are completing the correct form for the intended purpose, or even for the appropriate unit of state government. Titles also aid employees in knowing the purpose of a form, where to file or locate forms and records, and the relationship of forms to records retention schedules.

Forms will not be printed on letterhead as a means of agency identification. The standard title block provides better identification of a form. No person's name will appear on any State of North Dakota form. Unnecessary costs are incurred to update the form when personnel change.

A title for a form should be as brief and simple as possible. Four words is the guideline for maximum length. A title must clearly state the function or purpose of the form and will not use in-house terminology. Words such as "form" or "sheet" are not to be used in the title of a form - the fact it is a form, sheet, or card is obvious.

The name of the agency that originates and is responsible for the form will be the second line of the standard title block. The third line of the form's identification will have the state form number preceded by the letters "SFN" and the revision date. The agency may include a division name as the third line and then move the state form number and revision date to the fourth line.



TITLE OF FORM	(12 point - Bold)
DEPARTMENT NAME	(10 point)
DIVISION NAME	(10 point)
SFN XXXXX (XX-2019)	(8 point)

The Great Seal of the State of North Dakota will be part of the title block on all public impact forms and is optional on forms used within an office or agency and electronic forms, such as those completed and stored electronically or Web-based forms. If the Seal is not used on the electronic or internal form, the words "North Dakota" must precede the name of the agency in the title block. The title block will be placed in the upper left corner of the form whenever possible.

The recommended form identification on subsequent pages is to include the State Form Number, revision date, and page number. An example is included below.

SFN XXXXX (8-2019)

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2. PAPER AND INK

Generally, forms will be created using black ink or font. Ink must reproduce on copy machines and scanned images. Where it is necessary to have accent or separation to sections of a form, bold, fine, or broken lines, reverse print, or screening in black can be used.

Forms intended for use by persons with visual disabilities, and those for senior citizens in general, should be printed in clear, large type with black ink on a matte finished white paper. Glossy paper reflects light and colored ink may lack contrast; either or both can make forms difficult to read.

Twenty-pound paper is recommended for most general-purpose state forms. Different weights may be necessary for special use forms.

SIZE

The standard size paper for State of North Dakota forms will be 8 1/2 x 11 inches and sizes to which it can be cut without waste. Standard sizes in the commercial printing industry may include 11 x 17 inches, and 22 x 34 inches. Those sizes can be cut to 8 1/2 x 11 inches without waste.

Legal-size forms are to be avoided. A review of legal-size state forms reveals that nearly all can be revised to letter-size without loss of data.

Forms printed on one side of letter-size paper are usually more efficient than smaller forms printed on two sides of paper. Forms printed on two sides are usually more efficient than two separate pages and add less bulk to the files.

COLOR

Colored paper can be used as a tool in sorting and distributing high volume paperwork. For general use, colored paper has some disadvantages, such as: (1) it is usually more expensive than white paper, (2) it may not copy or scan clearly, (3) it lacks a professional image, (4) some colors may cause eyestrain for the user, and (5) reprints may not match.

Standard color and color sequence of carbonless (NCR) paper is available for printing state forms. The sequence of the colors may vary depending on the number of parts in a set. The original of all NCR paper sets is white paper. Forms with multiple parts will not deviate from the standard available carbonless paper. Information on use, color and sequence of carbonless paper is available from Central Services Division.

3. CAPTIONS

Captions are short instructions or questions which should provide or obtain exact information with a minimum of effort and without confusion. Wording should be designed so the person who fills in the form can interpret the caption clearly and easily. Words and phrases should be as simple as possible.

All forms are to be designed so they are self-explanatory to the person who is using the form.

Captions must cover only one point so the meaning will not be misunderstood. In-house terminology should be avoided, especially on forms used with the public/private sector. The typical form should be designed so it would cause no confusion to a person with an eighth-grade education.

Properly designed captions eliminate or reduce the need for lengthy instructions. If instructions are needed, they are to be separate from the data gathering portion (body) of the form.

Upper left captions in a box format will be the design standard for State of North Dakota forms. Upper left captions do not interfere with entering data and are not hidden while the field is being completed. Upper left captions in the box format are to be 8-point size or larger in regular font - not bold or italic. The captions will be in upper- and lower-case letters to conserve space and be easier to read. When the form is completed, upper left captions become secondary to the filled-in data.

Valuable paper space is consumed by captions either on or beneath the lines where data are to be entered, and neither result in a form that can be efficiently completed. Upper left captions make it possible to design a form with a minimum of visual stops, which is a measure of efficiency and cost-savings for forms that are filled in by hand or completed electronically.

BOX FORMAT WITH UPPER LEFT CAPTIONS

Name		Report Date		YES
Address	City	State	ZIP Code	
Job Title		Grade	Classification	
Email Address	Name of Supervisor			

CAPTIONS ON THE LINE

Name _____ Report Date _____

Address _____ City _____ State _____ ZIP Code _____

Job Title _____ Grade _____ Classification _____

Email Address _____ Name of Supervisor _____

NO

CAPTIONS BENEATH THE LINE

Name		Report Date		NO
Address	City	State	ZIP Code	
Job Title		Grade	Classification	
Email Address	Name of Supervisor			

REASONS THE BOX DESIGN WITH UPPER LEFT CAPTIONS IS BEST

1. The captions become secondary after the data is entered.
2. The captions do not consume valuable paper space that is needed for entering information.
3. The captions are not hidden while the form is being completed.
4. It is easier to provide the necessary amount of space for each of the form's data entry areas.
5. It allows a smaller, more compact, and efficient form.
6. Retrieval of data will be easier and more efficient because data entered is easier to locate for use.
7. The form will have better visual appearance.

4. SPACES

A critical part of forms design is assuring the right amount of space is provided for entries that will be made on the form. Given too much or too little space, persons filling in forms may not be sure they are giving the right answer. Accuracy may be impaired.

Forms analysis reviews the needs and predicts the proper amount of space for the typical anticipated answer. Those space requirements are then correlated to whatever equipment or process will be used to fill in the form.

Many items of information obtained on forms by state agencies are of a specific or predictable size. For example, social security numbers have nine digits, ages have from one to three digits, etc.

Standards for horizontal space on forms will be related to (1) the data to be gathered by the form, (2) the equipment or manual process by which the form will be completed, and (3) other individual characteristics of the form. One inch of space should be allowed for every four to six characters. This provides adequate space for most handwriting and is also good for typed entries.

Entry fields with box formatting and upper left captions should be 3/8" in height for vertical spacing. This is also the recommended size for handwriting.

Margins - Forms need margins of clear area for press gripper space, for appearance, and sometimes for punching holes and binding. All forms will allow a minimum of a 1/4-inch margin on all four sides of the form.

5. ORDER

Many forms take more time than necessary to complete and process because fill-in items are scattered randomly over the working part of the form. This is particularly true of forms printed in narrative. Such forms should be redesigned so that fill-in items are vertically aligned, separated from any narrative text, and given some logical order with box formats and upper left captions. This will reduce the time needed to complete a form, to find fields, and is also insurance that all items will be filled in.

The sequence of items on the form is important to the speed and accuracy of entering and extracting data. If items are taken from or entered onto other documents, all must have the same order. People are accustomed to reading from left to right and top to bottom, and forms should use that order. Some sequences are familiar, such as number, street, city, state, and ZIP code. The sequence of items on a form must follow the flow of work.

Most forms are composed of five basic parts:

1. Identification - the standard title block
2. Introduction - the who, what, and when
3. Body - the data entry area
4. Instructions - directions to users
5. Conclusion - affidavits and signatures

Not all five parts are required on every form. However, many parts are included, the sequence will be the same on all state forms.

IDENTIFICATION

The title block will be standard on all forms. The title block should be placed in the upper left corner of the form whenever possible. No names of any person will be used on a state form.

INTRODUCTION

The introduction on state forms will not generally be needed since proper captions and instructions will cover most introductory items.

BODY


The body of the form is the most important part. This area gathers or compiles the data and is the reason for which the form exists. All other parts of the form merely complement this part. The body of the form will be designed in box format with upper left captions, and a minimum of vertical alignment points.

If a compromise needs to be made between the amount of space allowed for any item and the need for vertical alignment, the vertical alignment should have first consideration. However, if adjustment is needed, it must be so that data entry areas provided are larger than minimum requirements.

Example of Good Vertical Alignment

(3 Vertical Alignment Points/Tabs)

Name (Last, First)		Date of Birth	
Address	City	State	ZIP Code
County	Email Address		
Name of Supervisor		Telephone Number	



Example of Poor Vertical Alignment

(6 Vertical Alignment Points/Tabs)

Last Name		First Name		Date of Birth	
Address			City	State	ZIP Code
County			Email Address		
Name of Supervisor				Telephone Number	



INSTRUCTIONS

A good form will be self-explanatory, although brief instructions may be needed. These instructions should be brief, concise, and easy to understand. Properly designed captions reduce the need for instructions. General instructions may include:

1. How to fill in the form - print, pen or pencil, etc. This should be at the top of the form where it can be read before starting to fill in data.

Whenever possible, the following instructions will be placed at the lower left of the form:

1. Where and when the form submitted or mailed
2. To whom a check would be payable and the amount due
3. Documents or items to submit with the form
4. Distribution/Routing instructions

Lengthy instructions on a form are seldom read and should be avoided. Instructions for completing a form, or for items to submit the form, should never appear within the body of the form. It is not necessary to instruct that a form *must be completed in its entirety*; it is understood that a form must be completed. If the form is properly designed, it will be completed.

Routing/distribution instructions are needed on most multi-part forms. These will be placed on the bottom of the form using the legend method. With the legend method, the printing is the same on all parts of the forms. Printing costs less and all recipients are aware of the distribution of all other parts of the form. If routing instructions are printed with the marginal method, each part of the form indicates only its own destination. Routing to a specific office, if needed, will be to a division or program -- no person's name will be used as part of any routing instructions.

Routing/Distribution Instructions

LEGEND METHOD - APPROVED

DISTRIBUTION:

WHITE - Director
 YELLOW - Accounting
 PINK - Applicant

DISTRIBUTION:

WHITE - Director
 YELLOW - Accounting
 PINK - Applicant

DISTRIBUTION:

WHITE - Director
 YELLOW - Accounting
 PINK - Applicant

MARGINAL METHOD - NOT APPROVED

To: Office of the Director

To: Accounting

To: Applicant

Filing reference data may also be part of the instructions on a form. This may be placed at the upper right corner of the form, or at the lower right, as dictated by filing, binding, or other requirements.

CONCLUSION

The signature area of a form will generally be at the lower right of the form. Captions used in the body of the form will clarify all items on the form so that title, date, or other explanation will seldom be needed with the signature line. State of North Dakota forms will not require that a signature be notarized, unless it is specifically mandated in the North Dakota Century Code. Requiring a person to have a signature notarized when not required by law is both an inconvenience and an unnecessary expense.

6. APPEARANCE

A form communicates in two ways. One is through the appearance of the form and the other is through the language or words used on the form. Both ways communicate a certain idea and work together to relay a total message.

Screening, reverse printing, and other graphic devices might improve a form and make it easier to process. However, when graphic devices are overdone, or when decorative borders and unnecessary ornamentation are used on a form, the form loses its image of being carefully or professionally designed. The fill-in data on a form is of primary importance and should not be overpowered by whatever is printed on the form.

The image the public/private sector has of an agency is influenced to a great extent by the quality of paperwork from that agency. Often, paperwork is the only contact the public has with a unit of state government, so that is what molds the image of state government. When the agency's forms look professional and well organized, the public will gain the impression that the agency is professionally managed and operated.